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ABSTRACT

This report discusses child-care needs and consumer education for low-income families, the types and value of information they receive when participating in the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program, the different approaches to child-care consumer education, case studies on the child-care practices that are detrimental as well as those that are beneficial, and ways local agencies can improve child-care consumer-education practices. The report explains that the JOBS consumer-education programs fail to meet the needs of families because the information is often incomplete, is provided in detail only to persistent clients, and is often of variable quality and because the programs are frequently unable to respond appropriately to changes in a client's circumstances. The attributes of effective consumer-education programs, namely, timely assistance, unbiased information, interactive processes, and an approach that is meaningful to the client, are highlighted. The report also explains how local agencies can improve child-care consumer education by developing appropriate educational materials, providing proper staff training, and ensuring that clients have enough time to make a child-care selection. (GLR)

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Child Care Consumer Education: Providing Critical Information to Low-income Parents

When parents seek child care, regardless of their income level, they have to examine available options, balance family values about work, childrearing, and education, and weigh practicalities like location, cost, and schedules. Child care comes in many forms, from grandmothers to local child care centers, and all forms of care can be excellent, satisfactory, or poor in quality. Learning about available child care alternatives can be complicated. How can state and local child care administrators and other interested groups help families make choices that both fit the practical needs of the adults and meet the developmental needs of the children?

Just like middle- and upper-income U.S. families, low-income families use child care in growing numbers. Recent federal child care legislation, including the Family Support Act, the Child Care and Development Block Grant, and the At-Risk Child Care Program, has increased the availability of direct child care subsidies for low-income families. Legislative requirements now mandate that parents who use the subsidies have access to a wide range of child care options and be able to choose among those options.

Research shows that low-income families' child care preferences resemble those of families in other income brackets. All families seeking child care appreciate a setting that assures the child's happiness and the child's opportunity to learn; and they want reassurance that the caregiver will devote sufficient attention to the child—i.e., maintain low ratios of children to adults. Low-income parents' child care choices often differ from those of other parents, however, because of the constraints they face as child care consumers:

- **Income**

  The average family spends approximately 10 percent of its income on child care, but families earning below $15,000 a year spend 23 percent of their total family income on child care costs. The jobs of low-income parents may not be stable, and income varies.

- **Working conditions**

  Low-income parents generally have low-wage jobs with nontraditional and unpredictable work schedules, evening hours, and mixed-shift work patterns. Few child care options accommodate these hours and wage fluctuations.

- **Neighborhood**

  Low-income families often live in deteriorated neighborhoods where public transportation and other basic services are limited. Poor facilities and poor market conditions mean that fewer center-based and licensed programs become established in those neighborhoods, and limited transportation makes it difficult for families to rely on child care elsewhere.

These constraints make the process of choosing child care more complex for low-income families than it is for others. Government-funded consumer education programs, which communicate objective information about child care services, are one way to help low-income families think through their preferences and options. These programs can guide the parents into becoming vigilant and informed consumers, supporting their efforts to make good, stable choices.

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Consumer Education for JOBS Program Participants—What Types of Information Do They Receive?

The Family Support Act guarantees child care assistance to those welfare recipients who need child care to participate in the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program or other state-approved education and training programs. A study by the National Center for Children in Poverty in 1991 documented how participants in welfare-to-work programs learn about and choose child care in nine states (California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, and Texas). Researchers found that, despite variations among and within states, the JOBS participants were left virtually alone to determine what type of child care would be best for their children and their family. Often, participants had to make key child care decisions practically on the spot, as they enrolled in the JOBS program. Sometimes the JOBS workers provided individualized child care assistance only after the participant's self-arranged child care had broken down and disrupted the client's JOBS activities.

In general, researchers found that many JOBS consumer education programs fail to meet the needs of families for a number of reasons, such as:

- **The information routinely given to all is incomplete.**

  Most JOBS participants learn about child care financial aid during group orientation sessions or in one-on-one interviews with caseworkers. These sessions typically explain that the government can pay for the child care costs of JOBS enrollees, and they describe how to arrange for these payments. If participants indicate that they do not have child care, they generally receive a brochure on child care—although most brochures describe only licensed care and offer little guidance to parents who plan to arrange care with relatives or friends.

- **Only persistent clients receive detailed information.**

  In some states, if clients persist in asking about child care, they learn where to attend informational sessions, or they can view a videotape on child care. In a few states, clients who need assistance may be directed to a child care resource and referral agency for help in making a selection. But the client who tells a caseworker that she already has or can find child care on her own may not receive any consumer information and assistance—even when it is available to others.

- **The quality of child care assistance for low-income families varies widely.**

  The information a client receives varies, depending on the knowledge, perspective, and training of the staff member who talks to the client. The staff member can be a caseworker or a resource and referral counselor. Personal biases about the "best" form of child care sometimes can lead caseworkers or counselors to steer parents toward a certain form of care, and they may not suggest other alternatives. In addition, untrained caseworkers may not be able to explain the characteristics of different forms of child care, and resource and referral counselors may be unfamiliar with the procedures associated with subsidy eligibility.

- **The client may need help again and again.**

  Many child care arrangements are unstable, and breakdowns in child care can force parents to make new arrangements. Also, as parents change training or work assignments or leave the JOBS program, their child care needs and subsidy status may change. Subsidy programs differ in allowable payment rates and care arrangements. Unfortunately, workers rarely tell the clients that such changes lie ahead, and this lack of knowledge makes it difficult to avoid disruptions in care, which are stressful for children and threaten the parents' work or training schedule.

Conducting Consumer Education—
Practices That Hinder and Practices That Help

To illustrate how different approaches to consumer education affect JOBS clients, the authors of the NCCP study constructed two scenarios concerning a hypothetical client named Brenda. The first scenario describes practices that can hinder the client's progress in moving from welfare to work, and the second suggests practices that can help the client. Some suggestions that emerge out of the sample scenarios appear on pages five and six.

Brenda was a 23-year-old single mother with a 16-month-old daughter, Samantha. She relied on her welfare check for support. In early spring, she received a letter from the state social services department notifying her that she must either enroll in the JOBS program or demonstrate that she was qualified for an exemption. The letter indicated that she should attend a JOBS orientation session in three weeks time at the social services office in her geographical area.

Brenda had never left Samantha with a caregiver before, although Brenda's grandmother took care of the toddler once or twice a week for one or two hours. The grandmother was elderly, with poor eyesight, and she had difficulty lifting Samantha. Although Brenda trusted her grandmother, she had concerns about leaving Samantha in her care on a full-time basis.

CONDUCTING CONSUMER EDUCATION
Practices That Hinder

Brenda was one of twenty young women at the JOBS orientation session. At the orientation, clients learned that their child care expenses would be paid for while they participated in a JOBS-approved activity. They also learned that if they did not have child care, such as a friend or relative who could look after their children, they would need to find it promptly.

After the orientation session, Brenda met with her caseworker to plan her JOBS participation. They decided she would attend a general equivalency diploma (GED) program. The caseworker took out a form and asked, "Do you have child care for your daughter?" Brenda replied, "My grandmother takes care of Samantha when I need her to." "All right," the caseworker said. "Here is the form for you and your grandmother to complete. Bring it back to me within two weeks. Since you have child care, you can start the GED program first thing Monday morning."

Three weeks later, the caseworker noticed from the attendance report that Brenda had stopped attending the GED class. She sent Brenda a notice informing her that she must come back into the JOBS office. Two weeks later, Brenda arrived at the office. When questioned, Brenda explained that her grandmother had taken care of Samantha for the first week of the class, but then admitted that the toddler was too much for her to handle. With no one to care for Samantha, Brenda had to stop attending the GED class.

"You'll have to find another arrangement," the caseworker said. "You can attend a child care orientation session here this Friday afternoon. The staff will tell you about day care centers, show a video, and give you a list of places to choose from. Then you will have two weeks to find care for your daughter."

Brenda attended the child care orientation where she learned about how to choose a child care center. The video depicted what she should look for when she visited a center, and it explained what questions to ask. Using the Yellow Pages, Brenda was able to find a center with space for Samantha, but this process took her almost two weeks. It was now nearly seven weeks since the GED class had begun, and Brenda had missed too many classes to continue. She had to start over with both the class and child care at a later date.

CONDUCTING CONSUMER EDUCATION

Practices That Help

At the JOBS orientation session Brenda attended, clients learned that child care would be paid for while they participated in a JOBS activity and for up to one year after they stopped receiving welfare payments. They learned that they could choose any kind of child care that met their family's needs—for instance, a relative, a trusted friend, a family day care provider, a center, or Head Start, or a combination of these. They were encouraged to discuss their child care needs with their caseworkers after the orientation session, and they learned about a staff child care specialist who could help them further. The orientation class then viewed a videotape about different types of child care and how to look for quality care arrangements.

When Brenda met with her caseworker, they decided she should attend a GED class. The caseworker then asked if she had been in school or had held a job previously, and whether she had used child care before. "I've basically been at home with Samantha since she was born," Brenda told her. "When I need to go to an appointment or out for a few hours, my grandmother takes care of her."

The caseworker asked whether Brenda's grandmother could care for her child on a regular basis. Brenda mentioned her worries about leaving Samantha for long periods of time with her grandmother, but indicated that she did not trust a stranger with her child. Besides, she did not know where else to turn. They decided it would be best if Brenda collected more information about child care in her area. They developed a list of people Brenda could talk to, including the JOBS child care specialist, a neighbor Brenda knew whose three-year-old toddler was in child care, as well as the director of a center down the street that Brenda had heard about. They made an appointment for Brenda with the child care specialist, and they agreed that Brenda would call the caseworker to discuss her progress later in the week.

Brenda did her fact-finding and met with the JOBS child care expert. She described more about the kind of child care she wanted, and she received a list of centers and family day care homes in her area. She visited the center down the street and was impressed with what she saw, but then she learned that the center had a waiting list. She talked to her neighbor and found out about a family day care home that her neighbor had heard good things about. Brenda visited the home and liked the caregiver. They had a long discussion about daily activities and meals, the amount of time the children spent outdoors, the caregiver's philosophy about discipline, and about the neighborhood children who were in her care. The caregiver gave Brenda a tour of her home and invited her to come back with Samantha to visit. When Brenda returned, she liked the way the caregiver kneeled down to Samantha's level and made eye contact with her right away. Samantha seemed shy, but interested.

After another discussion with the JOBS child care expert, Brenda decided to use the family day care home she had visited. She returned there again, asked the provider to fill out the appropriate forms, and returned the forms to her JOBS caseworker. Four weeks after she first came into the JOBS office, she began her GED class. Two weeks later, the caseworker called her to confirm that everything was going well. Brenda reported that during the first week her daughter had cried every time she was left in day care. The family day care provider assured her that this was normal, however, and shortly afterward Samantha seemed to adjust. A month later, when the caseworker telephoned again, Brenda reported that everything was fine—both with her child care and with her GED class.

Changing the Concept of Consumer Education Programs

The approaches to child care consumer education revealed in the nine-state study showed that well-meaning staff members sometimes fail to help low-income parents choose workable child care arrangements. Too often, program staff provide child care information that is too general to be useful, is slanted one way or another, or is insensitive to the problems the parents face.

To truly support parent choice, consumer education must be timely, unbiased, interactive, and meaningful to the families for whom the education is intended. Effective consumer education programs have the following attributes:

- **Timely assistance**

  As JOBS participants enter the program, every client eligible to receive a child care subsidy promptly receives consumer education. After that *early* start, the client needs *time* to search for child care, to evaluate various options, and to establish a trusting and stable relationship with a child care provider. A parent who has *ongoing access* to consumer education counseling can draw on that support to work through the child care problems that may arise. The client and the staff member can also anticipate changes in eligibility so that transitions can be handled smoothly.

- **Unbiased information**

  Materials about child care help parents when they offer *specific objective information about all forms of child care*, including center-based care, regulated family day care, and informal arrangements with relatives or friends. After a balanced discussion, parents can recognize how extensively the government monitors each form of care. Staff members should review the pros and cons of each form, but should not flatly recommend or dismiss any form of child care.

- **Interactive process**

  An interactive consumer education process involves the parents in an *information exchange*. The parents contribute information about their specific family's child care needs, preferences, and constraints, such as lack of transportation or complex family schedules. The agency staff member reviews the child care options that might work, given the circumstances presented, helps the parents think through the advantages and limitations of available options, and works with the parents to develop a strategy for choosing care.

- **Meaningful approach**

  Meaningful consumer education is *accessible, relevant, and useful* to the parents it is designed to assist. Printed materials and media should facilitate communication between the parents and staff, not replace it. Brochures, checklists, and videotapes can refer the parents to a specific individual or to a location that has more information. These materials should be attractive, engaging, and accessible to families who speak languages other than English or who have low reading levels. They should also be sensitive to the difficulties of finding dependable child care and to the lives of low-income families.

Consumer education designed with these attributes will inform parents, support them as they seek a child care solution that works for them, and prepare them to manage changes. It increases the likelihood that the child care will work out and will give the child and parent needed stability. How can these attributes be included in programs? Ways that local agencies can improve their practices appear in the checklist on page six.

Ways Local Agencies Can Improve Child Care Consumer Education Practices—A Checklist

✔ **Ensure that detailed child care information reaches all individuals who are eligible for child care subsidies.**

Even parents who have child care when they enroll in a job training or education program can benefit from discussing what it means to be a child care consumer and from learning about child care options they might not have considered. By inviting all parents who receive subsidies to child care orientation sessions, agencies can help parents improve decision-making and prevent many child care problems.

✔ **Develop appropriate consumer education materials.**

Carefully evaluated presentations, videotapes, brochures, and checklists can help families obtain the right kind of child care for them. Selected members of the target population can review the materials in draft form to make sure the information is clear, helpful, and not prescriptive or biased. Materials should be relevant to and respectful of the parents for whom they are prepared. Sensitivity toward parents shows when materials reflect the constraints that families face as they attempt to arrange child care.

✔ **Establish a staff position dedicated to child care consumer education.**

Child care is a complex field. To assist parents with child care, staff must be knowledgeable about child care and family decision-making, and they need time to provide effective assistance. Strong consumer education programs assign individuals to focus on this work—such as caseworkers in a welfare agency, or resource and referral counselors working under contract—and they ensure that staff members' caseloads allow sufficient time for one-on-one discussions with parents.

✔ **Train the child care consumer education staff.**

Helping parents learn about child care alternatives and the publicly funded subsidy system takes knowledge and skill. Staff need expertise in counseling techniques, as well as familiarity with the characteristics and availability of all forms of child care. They also need to understand how the child care subsidy programs operate (eligibility, application procedures, requirements, and payment methods).

✔ **Ensure that clients have enough time to make a child care selection.**

The best consumer education program will have little effect if clients must look around and choose a care arrangement within a week. It takes many hours and days to telephone caregivers, identify where care is available, visit the caregivers, and evaluate the strengths and limitations of each. Forcing a hasty choice, so the parent can initiate training or work immediately, sharply increases the likelihood of a later interruption when the child care arrangement breaks down.

✔ **Build in ongoing two-way communications and contacts to prevent child care crises.**

Parents who have ongoing access to a well-trained staff member can address problems as they arise. A consultation by telephone or in person may avert the crisis that occurs when a child care arrangement breaks down. Regular contact also enables the staff member to alert the client in advance of any change in eligibility for child care subsidies, so that plans can be made for handling the transition smoothly.

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